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John Watts de Peyster

*Saratoga Daily Journal*, 8th August, 1888.

### GATES vs. BURGOYNE.

A PLEA IN BEHALF OF GATES—"ANCHOR" DRAWS OUT AN ANSWER.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE JOURNAL:

I see that "Anchor" (General J. Watts de Peyster) uses a large portion of one page of the *Journal* this morning to convince himself, and possibly others, that the sole credit of the victory of Saratoga and the surrender of Burgoyne belonged to General Philip Schuyler, the waiting McClellan of the Revolutionary war, and to write down General Horatio Gates as a mere accident of fortune and a blunderer.

Now, I agree with General de Peyster, that the monument at Schuylerville is mislocated, and that Burgoyne was responsible for his own defeat in not obeying his orders in going up Lake George to Fort William Henry, there leave his artillery and baggage, and follow down the Loudon military road direct from there to Albany, that was constructed in 1758, and over which Abercrombie's and Amherst's armies had marched in that and the following years. In the latter army General Horatio Gates and General Phillips, chief of Burgoyne's artillery, had held subaltern positions in the same regiment.

But I think he confesses judgment against Schuyler when he tells how easily Phillips drove St. Clair from Fort Ti by planting a battery on the unguarded but commanding Mount Defiance. For he forgets to state that when Gates superseded Schuyler the latter had retreated to the Sprouts of the Mohawk, and was throwing up those earthworks that yet remain on the islands opposite Waterford, totally unmindful that Burgoyne would probably cross the Mohawk at the Loudon ford, about a mile above the Cohoes falls, and could easily shell him out of his pits from batteries to be placed on the heights where the mansion of ex-Mayor Johnston of Cohoes now stands.

Then he attributes to Schuyler the impeding of Burgoyne's ascent of Wood creek from Skeneboro. The historical truth is that it was done by Colonel Long in his retreat, who wisely used his powder in blasting rocks from the bluffs above Fort Ann, in the narrow gorge through which the creek flows, and effectually destroyed its navigation.

Whatever may have been the merits of Gates' defeat at Camden with his raw militia against Cornwallis' veterans, at Saratoga he was on ground familiar to his early manhood when serving in the English army. He correctly moved his army as far north as he could to retrieve the blunder of Schuyler's retreat, and if he had been defeated at Bemis Heights, intended to fall back behind Anthony's kill at Mechanicville, and if needs be across the Mohawk, and thus have three lines of vantage to depend upon, or fair grounds, instead of being "bottled"—

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as Grant expressively said of Ben. Butler when he placed himself in a like erroneous position—on the islands in the delta of the Mohawk.

I do not question the patriotism of General Philip Schuyler. It was as pure as the virgin gold. But his military capacity, like that of some generals on both sides in the late rebellion, who leaped to the saddle from their seats in Congress, is open to criticism that his friends must admit of. At Gettysburgh the impetuous Dan. Sickles, ignorant of the arts of war but brave to a fault, moved his corps from the line established by Gen. Meade, in a moment when he thought the exigencies of war required it. Longstreet poured his legions through that gap and thousands of brave Union soldiers had fallen before the gallant Hancock had retrieved the day and Sickles himself had received the wound that makes him a maimed veteran on the streets of Saratoga to-day. So Schuyler. Gates retrieved his error before it reached the strait that happened at Gettysburgh, and the surrender of Burgoyne at Saratoga followed from the wisdom of that movement of Gen. Gates.

#### HISTORICAL JUSTICE.

SARATOGA SPRINGS, August 7.

*Saratoga Daily Journal, Thursday, 30th August, 1883.*

#### WHO "BURGOYNE'D" BURGOYNE.

AN ANSWER TO A "PLEA ON BEHALF OF GATES."

#### "ANCHOR DRAWS OUT AN ANSWER"—WHICH IS ANSWERED.

"The most fortunate, and at the same time unfortunate, of the generals of the Revolution, Horatio Gates, was, like Lee, St. Clair, Conway [Montgomery, La Fayette, de Coudray, de Kalb, Howe, Steuben, Duportail, de Woedtke, Mercer, McIntosh, de Fermoy, de Borre, and Pulaski, de La Neuville, Irvine, Armand, de La Rouerie, Kuscusko,] a foreigner by birth [and initiatory service]. He was one of those individuals whom fortune rather than ability makes famous. With little original talent, but great self-sufficiency; more of the fine soldier than the true general; elegant, but shallow; chivalrous in manner rather than in fact; captious, unjust, stooping to low arts to rise; yet courteous, dignified, honorable according to ordinary standards; a fair tactician and a brave man, a soldier who bore misfortune better than success, his character presents itself to the analyst as merely that of a common-place commander, without one atom of the hero in his composition. A train of fortunate circumstances presented victory before him, and though he had the genius [?] to secure it, he had none beyond that. Had he been more self-poised he might have proved a greater man. But, unlike Washington [and Grant], success destroyed his equilibrium of mind, and precipitated him into acts of presumptuous folly."—"Peterson's Military History of the Revolution."

While "Historical Justice," in the *Daily Journal* of the 8th, treats my article in the issue of the 7th with so much courtesy—which is acknowledged in like spirit—the very modulated tone of his paragraphs made the more dangerous as a vindication of Gates, who never did anything to merit so chivalric a champion. It is now my intention to endeavor to answer this knightly opponent clause by clause.

As "Historical Justice" gives up Burgoyne, all that remains to be done here is to pay due attention to the case of Gates.

Gibbon, who stands indisputably at the head of historians--let whoever attempt to criticise his master-piece of English literature on any grounds whatever--in a note remarks that Dr. Adam Smith, in his "Wealth of Nations," "proves, perhaps too severely, that the most salutary effects have flowed from the meanest and most selfish causes." Whoever will examine into the interior history and correspondence of the American Revolution will find how truly this remark applies to the many developments of that event. With the exception of Washington, Schuyler and certain other noble spirits--among whom Gates has no place--the men of foreign extraction who shot up into prominence were actuated altogether by interested motives. With the exception, perhaps, of LaFayette, there was really no disinterested individual of ability who came from abroad to the assistance of the struggling colonies (Chastellux, I, 304-5). Rank, glory, high pay—which, by the way, they did not get—were the lures, and de Kalb, who displayed gallantry enough at Camden to redeem a lifetime, was the paid agent of the French Ministry "fishing in troubled waters" for the benefit rather of France than of America (Graham III., iv., 459, &c.) What good the English Lee or the English Gates did for this country, it would be difficult to show.

It is said that a dissection of character made according to the unfailing rules of physiology, physiognomy and phrenology has never failed to reveal the secrets of any man's character. Take the best likenesses, pen, pencil or medalic, of Gates, study the face and figure, and the gauntlet can safely be thrown down to any one who will attempt the examination, defying him to prove by any rule of judgment, admitted as trustworthy, that Gates can be shown to have had in him any of the elements of a great commander or of an able man; while on the other hand there are plenty of the indications of a character which only rises by tortuous methods, the inevitable recourse of lower minds—minds too often destitute of any of the higher gifts. "His portrait," writes Peterson, as seen on the Burgoyne medal, "is eminently characteristic. The finely chiseled profile, and graceful flow of the hair, contrasted with the *low and retreating forehead, conjure up* vividly before the mind *the idea of elegant mediocrity.*"

This rule of judging may be styled idealism. Sir Humphrey Davy wrote to Dr. Kingsley, "Nothing exists but Thoughts," and the "Science of Man" declares "we must either say all is Mind, with the idealist, or all is Matter with the materialist." The writer believes with the advocates of Mind, which, in any grand sense, Gates did not have, and by mind must the Briton be judged.

Now let us see if the indications of the Science of Lavater are not borne out by incontestable facts. Leaving out for another article, if necessary, any detailed investigation of "Historical Justice's" accusation against Schuyler, it would be unjust not to repel the parallel between New York's representative man and New Jersey's political idol.

To institute a comparison between a commander who, with 134,285 men, was held at bay by 55,000 and *phantoms* at first ; then by 10,000 (Magruder says 5,000) ; and who when, still at the head of 115,000, was hustled around generally by inferior numbers, is pretty hard upon another who did do *something* with a few poor troops against double the number of excellent ones and planned and carried out two highly successful flank operations. Much as the writer dislikes Gates—and lest the dead should know of what passes here, and have their feelings hurt in consequence—he would not couple names nor institute parallels, as "Historical Justice" has done since. Gates *did* hold the ground he assumed, and did not change his base, nor was *his* Malvern Bemis Heights, aided by a sister service ; neither was his first fight, Freeman's Farm, simply defensive, like Malvern Hill, and although a victory followed by a retreat. The success, however, in very truth, was not his, since Arnold did pretty much all that was done, notwithstanding Gates then tried, and his friends have ever since endeavored, to deprive the American of any credit whatever and the latter, the admirers of Gates, to give it to the Britisher.

Gates did nothing but talk, and he was great at that. Gates was actually arguing with a dying English officer and aggravating him, a mortally wounded prisoner, while Arnold was winning for him the final battle of Saratoga, an exploit which must have chagrined Gates to the uttermost, since nothing was farther from his mind than to afford Arnold an opportunity to win any glory whatever. The American people accepted Gates as a hero through ignorance, just as an untutored Negro accepts a bone with a feather stuck in it for a god.

The writer has never talked with an individual whose ancestors served at Saratoga, except one, whose father was a personal friend of Gates, who ever gave any credit to Gates and did not, on the other hand, give all the credit to Schuyler.

Oh, that a fellow trustee of the Saratoga [Battlefield] Monument Association—who had forefathers and a number of their friends at Saratoga, in 1777—would come out in print and express what he has forcibly said in conversation in regard to the recent statements depreciating the pretensions of Gates and endorsing the merits of Schuyler.

Lt.-Col. Kingston, Burgoyne's adjutant general, testified : "I remember our scouts giving information that a bridge was laid over the Hudson river, very near the enemy's camp ; and it was the opinion of some very confidential men that were employed in that army in that capacity, and were much under the direction of General Fraser, that on the approach of Sir Henry Clinton's army, the army of Mr. Gates could not stand us, but would cross the river and go towards New England."

If it is true that Gates refused to send regular troops, or those he deemed trustworthy, to defend Albany, was it not a proof, if of nothing else, that he was afraid that Burgoyne would get the better of him anyway ? Is it not true that he would not weaken himself by a single efficient man ? If worsted, did he not intend to step off across

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his bridge into New England? Such would have been an elegant manœuvre indeed with militia. Gates might have got off, but the British artillery from the Heights would soon have knocked the bridge into "pi," and the Hudson would have been filled with Yankees as the Potomac was with Unionists after Ball's Bluff; and as on the 20th of September, after Antietam, when a part of Fitz John Porter's division were pushed over, and according to a bitter Rebel writer, that river was soon "blue with drowning Yankees," "filled with dead and wounded attempting to escape." This would have realized the allusion of "Historical Justice" to the effect of Burgoyne's batteries on the heights of Cohoes, upon Schuyler's "pits" or earthworks among the Sprouts of the Mohawk.

"Historical Justice" says that "Anchor" "confesses judgment against Schuyler when he tells how easily Phillips drove St. Clair from Fort 'Ti' by planting a battery on the unguarded but commanding Mount Defiance."

Spirit of justice! If Schuyler was to blame for St. Clair, or the latter for himself, in connection with Ticonderoga, has Gates a leg left to stand on? Why did Gates himself neglect to fortify Mount Defiance, the key to Ty, when this great genius was in command in the previous year, and the capabilities and the perils of that height were indicated and demonstrated by palpable proofs by Trumbull and others. Genius loves to grapple with such problems, and true genius solves them. Gates had no genius for war, however much for intrigue.

With regard to Gates' "defeat at Camden," "Anchor" and "Historical Justice" are at direct issue. Gates called his force "The Grand Army." Now, even if he was a fool, which is not charged—a boaster or worse to call it so—he would not have presumed to make himself a complete laughing-stock by giving to it such a pompous title, as "The Grand Army," (?!) if it had been composed entirely of "raw militia," or if even those were good for nothing against the British. In the honest sense of "raw militia," is that term applicable to men who had been engaged all their life in continued warfare, of one kind or another; to men perfectly accustomed to the use of fire-arms, and who, on more than one occasion, had been in action. The same quality of troops conquered the picked "Provincial Brigade" of the "distinguished partisan" Ferguson, by the weight and accuracy of their fire.

As to preparation, he did nothing. It is conceded that Gates "did not even know the strength of the force that was to be handled." He expected to surprise Cornwallis. He himself was surprised. "It was still within the power of General Gates to fall back to a strong position; but he lacked nerve and decision for such an hour." He called his generals—he had plenty of them—asking what is to be done? The gallant Stevens answered: "Is it not too late *now* to do anything but fight?"

The New Englanders charged Schuyler with haughtiness. These people would not brook discipline. Gates was superecilious and overbearing in the extreme when he had no point to gain by an opposite

course. Just as Leake tells us in his "Life of Lamb," that he treated Captain Mott in 1777, he repulsed Marion just before Camden in 1780. It is said that no regularly educated or experienced officer of his rank in the colonial army had seen so little actual or active service consistent with that rank as Gates. Bancroft, who was no friend to Schuyler, stigmatizes Gates as "an intriguer and no soldier." His march to the field of Camden was disgraceful to him as a general; how much more so his abandonment of the field.

General Carrington, one of the ablest and most careful of the writers on the American Revolution, says: "Gates had *no power* in action, and there is not a redeeming fact during his connection with the Southern army to show his fitness to command troops." (513, B. A. R.) "It has been seen that he participated actively in one part of the operations near Saratoga until the morning of August 11th, 1777. Confiding in numbers, and neglecting reconnoissances, he then imperiled his army by forcing several brigades across Fishkill creek, while remaining in the rear himself." Just as he plunged like a reckless incapable into the *champ-clos*, or lists of Camden.

"Historical Justice" makes a great point of the veterans of Cornwallis. His army were not all "veterans." Does "Historical Justice" know that out of these nominal veterans (C. 236), Lord Rawdon, who commanded the British left, had no "veterans." It consisted of the Royal Volunteers of Ireland, raised in America since 1776; the Legion Infantry, to whom a similar remark applies; Colonel Hamilton's Corps of North Carolina Loyal Volunteers, recently recruited; and Colonel Bryan's North Carolina Loyal Volunteers, organized in 1780. There is no doubt that they were better stuff than the militia opposed to them, but especially so because they were commanded by men of more sterling qualities, since it was admitted that the loyalist or tory—most honorable title, in his case—Hamilton, was a man of distinguished ability.

We now come to the last paragraph of "Historical Justice's" article, in which he compares the military capacity of Schuyler with that of Sickles, and puts a head on the latter for his action at Gettysburgh.

On this subject "Anchor" has much to say, for he knows all about it and would snap his fingers at the opinions of the whole world if they were against his own. Fortunately, he does not stand alone in his judgment, but has backers of the highest authority. Grant, to whom the question was submitted on the ground, after listening to arguments unfavorable to Sickles, said: "Sickles was right."

That Longstreet poured his legions through "that gap" is one of the greatest fallacies that ever got into print. "That gap" never existed. If any unmilitary writer chooses to style the interval or space between the right flank of a force thrown forward in echelon and the left flank of the next force more to the right and rear, there was a "gap," but not a rebel soldier ever got through it. Longstreet broke through the left of the Third Corps where there was *no* "gap," simply

because the Third Corps was breached or punched and was not adequately supported. Hancock came in to retrieve Meade's error, not the fault of Sickles, because Sickles had committed no error. Hancock saved Meade from the effects of his own want of prevision, and not from any act either of *omission* or of *commission* on the part of Sickles, simply because Sickles did not expose himself to either charge.

Finally, Gates at Saratoga did nothing and retrieved nothing. He jeopardized everything on the morning of the 11th of August, 1777, (Carrington, 514,) and then, like the conventional stage father, benefactor or chief—who had done scarcely anything throughout the piece, but show himself—came to the front at the last moment, with “Bless you, my children;” stepped elegantly to the footlights and pronounced a few words of Epilogue. Then the prompter rang down the curtain and the pseudo conqueror walked off, like Time conducted by Destiny, in the *opera bouffe* of “Orphée aux Enfers,” to reappear as Alexander at the head of his “Grand Army” in his next performance at Camden, which was a tragedy indeed for the country, and one of the worst failures on record of a general for himself. ANCHOR (J. W. DE P.)

Saratoga Evening Journal, Friday, 7th September, 1883.

#### COL. LONG AT WOOD CREEK.

We publish a brief article to-day from General de Peyster (“Anchor”), in reply to a criticism on his former article on General Schuyler, by “Historical Justice.” Both these writers are gentlemen who know pretty well whereof they speak, and the topic is one of real interest to students of the Revolutionary history of Saratoga.

#### COL. LONG AND WOOD CREEK, 6-7 JULY, 1777.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE JOURNAL:

“Historical Justice” goes on to say, “Then he [Gen. de P.] attributes to Schuyler “the impeding of Burgoyne’s ascent of Wood Creek” up from Skanesborough. “The historical truth is that it was done by Colonel Long in his retreat, who wisely used his powder in blasting rocks from the bluffs above Fort Ann, in the narrow gorge through which the creek flows, and effectually destroyed its navigation.” What proofs can be produced for this claim on behalf of Colonel Long?

The British broke through the boom barrier, or bridge, at Ticonderoga before 9 a. m., 6th July, and reached Skanesborough (now Whitehall) only two hours later than the Americans—early in the afternoon of the same day. Colonel Long landed his battalion at about 3 p. m.,\* 6th July, and marched directly to Fort Ann, eleven or

\* “The [American] boats reached Skanesborough about three o’clock on the afternoon of the same day [6th July], when the fugitives landed to enjoy, as they fancied, a temporary repose; but in less than two hours they were startled by the

twelve miles further south. He must have consumed the whole daylight getting over that distance through the woods and swamps. Early next day, 7th July, Long retraced his steps three miles, had a hard fight with the British Colonel Hill, and that afternoon, having returned to Fort Ann and burned it, retired to Fort Edward, on the Hudson. That is to say, this Colonel Long, who is represented as using his powder in blasting rocks on the 6th, still had powder enough to fight next day a smart little battle which lasted a number of hours. How did the soldiers under Long obtain or carry with them any super-abundant powder on this exhausting march, and where did he get tools to drill and appliances for blasting? He did march eleven or twelve miles, we know, from Skenesborough (Whitehall) to Fort Ann, after 3 p. m. on the 6th July, consequently he had no time to obstruct Wood Creek on that day. Next day he fought an engagement three miles in advance of Fort Ann—i. e., in the direction of Skenesborough—retreated to Fort Ann, burned the post, and fell back nine miles farther to Fort Edward—having marched fifteen miles, besides fighting desperately for a number of hours on the 7th. Consequently he could have had no time on the 7th. When and how did he perform the engineering feats attributed to him?

ANCHOR (J. W. DE P.)

reports of the cannon of the British gunboats, which were firing at the galleys which were lying at the wharf. By uncommon effort and industry, Burgoyne had broken through the chain boom, and bridge, at Ticonderoga, and had followed in pursuit with the 'Royal George' and 'Inflexible' and a detachment of the gun-boats under Captain Carter. The pursuit had been pressed with such vigor that, *at the very moment when the Americans were landing at Skenesborough, three British regiments disembarked at the head of South Bay,* with the intention of occupying the road to Fort Edward. Had Burgoyne delayed the attack upon the galleys until these regiments had reached the Fort Edward road, the whole party at Skenesborough would have been taken prisoners. Alarmed, however, by the approach of the gunboats, *the latter blew up three of the galleys, set fire to the fort, mill, and storehouse, and retired in great confusion toward Fort Ann.* Occasionally the overburdened party would falter on their retreat, when the startling cry of 'March on, the Indians are at our heels,' would revive their drooping energies and give strength to their weakened limbs. At five o'clock in the morning [7th July], they reached Fort Ann, where they were joined by many of the invalids who had been carried up Wood Creek in boats. A number of the sick, with the cannon, provisions, and most of the baggage, were left behind at Skenesborough.

On the 7th, a small reinforcement, sent from Fort Edward by Schuyler, arrived at Fort Ann. About the same time a detachment of British troops approached within sight of the fort. This detachment was attacked from the fort, and repulsed with some loss; a surgeon, a wounded captain, and twelve privates were taken prisoners by the Americans. The next day Fort Ann was burned, and the garrison retreated to Fort Edward, which was then occupied by Gen. Schuyler."— "History of Saratoga County, New York," by Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester. Philadelphia : Evarts and Ensign, 1878, page 51.

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